

The Book of Genesis

Chapter 31

31:1 Jacob heard that Laban's sons were saying, "Jacob has taken everything our father owned and has gained all this wealth from what belonged to our father." (NIV)

Jealousy

Just as Isaac's wealth had made the Philistines jealous, so now Laban and his sons were becoming jealous of Jacob.

31:2 And Jacob noticed that Laban's attitude toward him was not what it had been [NKJ: "favorable toward him as before"]. (NIV)

Time Frame

This event occurred in 1718 B.C. when Jacob was 98 years old. Joseph would have been 6 years old.

31:3 Then the LORD said to Jacob, "Go back to the land of your fathers and to your relatives, and I will be with you." (NIV)

Fulfillment

God had earlier promised to bring him again into the Land of Promise (28:15), and now the time had come for God to fulfill that promise.

31:4-5 So Jacob sent word to Rachel and Leah to come out to the fields where his flocks were. He said to them, "I see that your father's attitude toward me is not what it was before, but the God of my father has been with me. (NIV)

Time of Shearing

This was the time of shearing, and it was not unusual for the households of the men to come and set up camp at the shearing station. This would aid Jacob in leaving without being suspected too quickly.

31:6-8 You know that I've worked for your father with all my strength, yet your father has cheated me by changing my wages ten times [TAN: "time and again"]. However, God has not allowed him to harm me. If he said, 'The speckled ones will be your wages,' then all the flocks gave birth to speckled young; and if he said, 'The streaked ones will be your wages,' then all the flocks bore streaked young. (NIV)

God's Intervention

God supernaturally intervened to cause all the newborn animals to have the markings that Laban established as belonging to Jacob. This so frustrated Laban that he was continually changing the marking that belonged to Jacob, and God would reciprocate by causing the newborns to have the newly designated coloration.

31:9 So God has taken away your father's livestock and has given them to me. (NIV)

Jacob's livestock breeding technique insured superior quality animals, but it was God that caused his animals to grow in number.

31:10-12 *"In breeding season I once had a dream in which I looked up and saw that the male goats mating with the flock were streaked, speckled or spotted. The angel of God said to me in the dream, 'Jacob.' I answered, 'Here I am.' And He said, 'Look up and see that all the male goats mating with the flock are streaked, speckled or spotted, for I have seen all that Laban has been doing to you. (NIV)*

God comforted Jacob by showing him that He would supernaturally alter the genetic makeup of the animals so that the offspring produced would always be the wage [coloration] that Laban established at the time.

31:13 *I am the God of Bethel, where you anointed a pillar and where you made a vow to me. Now leave this land at once and go back to your native land." (NIV)*

Omnipotent God

The Canaanites believed that a god of one particular area could only be reached in that specific area, but El Shaddai was showing the patriarchs that this stationary idea did not apply to Him.

31:14 *Then Rachel and Leah replied, "Do we still have any share in the inheritance of our father's estate?" (NIV)*

Daughters' Place

Daughters did not inherit unless there were no sons. When Jacob first came to Haran, Laban had no sons and all that he had would be left to his daughters. Since sons had been born to Laban however, there was no reason for them to remain in their father's household.

31:15-16 *Does he not regard us as foreigners? Not only has he sold us, but he has used up what was paid for us. Surely all the wealth that God took away from our father belongs to us and our children. So do whatever God has told you." (NIV)*

Laban's daughters did not have much respect for him because of the way he had treated them over the years.

31:17-21 *Then Jacob put his children and his wives on camels, and he drove all his livestock ahead of him, along with all the goods he had accumulated in Paddan Aram, to go to his father Isaac in the land of Canaan. When Laban had gone to shear his sheep, Rachel stole her father's household gods [Hebrew: "teraphim"; NKJ,TAN: "idols"]. Moreover, Jacob deceived Laban the Aramean ["arami" could be a wordplay on "cheat:" "ramai"] by not telling him he was running away. So he fled with all he had, and crossing the River [TAN: "Euphrates"], he headed for the hill country of Gilead. (NIV)*

Route to Canaan

The route to Canaan required going west from Haran and crossing the Euphrates prior to reaching Carchemish, where it turned southward.

31:22-26 *On the third day Laban was told that Jacob had fled. Taking his relatives with him, he pursued Jacob for seven days and caught up with him in the hill country of Gilead. Then God came to Laban the Aramean in a dream at night and said to him, "Be*

careful not to say anything to Jacob, either good or bad [Hebrew: "from good to evil" = do not verbally and physically attack him]. "***Jacob had pitched his tent in the hill country of Gilead when Laban overtook him, and Laban and his relatives camped there too. Then Laban said to Jacob, "What have you done? You've deceived me, and you've carried off my daughters like captives in war.*** (NIV)

Leah and Rachel

Laban's claim on Leah and Rachel as daughters could not be greater than Jacob's claim on them as his wives.

31:27-29 Why did you run off secretly and deceive me? Why didn't you tell me, so I could send you away with joy and singing to the music of tambourines and harps? You didn't even let me kiss my grandchildren and my daughters good-by. You have done a foolish thing. I have the power to harm you; but last night the God of your father said to me, 'Be careful not to say anything to Jacob, either good or bad.' (NIV)

Laban

Laban once again shows that he did not know the true God.

31:30-32 Now you have gone off because you longed to return to your father's house. But why did you steal my gods?" Jacob answered Laban, "I was afraid, because I thought you would take your daughters away from me by force. But if you find anyone who has your gods, he shall not live. In the presence of our relatives, see for yourself whether there is anything of yours here with me; and if so, take it." Now Jacob did not know that Rachel had stolen the gods. (NIV)

Due to Laban's deceptive and selfish practices, Jacob suspected that Laban would even attempt to prevent him from taking his wives with him.

31:33-35 So Laban went into Jacob's tent and into Leah's tent and into the tent of the two maidservants, but he found nothing. After he came out of Leah's tent, he entered Rachel's tent. Now Rachel had taken the household gods and put them inside her camel's saddle and was sitting on them. Laban searched through everything in the tent but found nothing. Rachel said to her father, "Don't be angry, my lord, that I cannot stand up in your presence; I'm having my period." So he searched but could not find the household gods. (NIV)

Defilement

A menstruating woman was considered defiled, and would not normally touch a sacred object.

31:36-37 Jacob was angry and took Laban to task. "What is my crime?" he asked Laban. "What sin have I committed that you hunt me down? Now that you have searched through all my goods, what have you found that belongs to your household? Put it here in front of your relatives and mine, and let them judge between the two of us. (NIV)

Jacob and Laban

Since the idols were not found, Jacob suspected that the story of the theft was fabricated to give Laban the chance to make a general search of his things.

31:38-39 *"I have been with you for twenty years now. Your sheep and goats have not miscarried, nor have I eaten rams from your flocks. I did not bring you animals torn by wild beasts; I bore the loss myself. And you demanded payment from me for whatever was stolen by day or night.* (NIV)

Jacob worked 20 years for Laban above the amount of time originally agreed upon.

31:40-41 *This was my situation: The heat consumed me in the daytime and the cold at night, and sleep fled from my eyes. It was like this for the twenty years I was in your household. I worked for you fourteen years for your two daughters and six years for your flocks, and you changed my wages ten times.* (NIV)

Jacob now reflects back that he had worked fourteen years [1758-1744 B.C.] for Leah and Rachel, then twenty years [1744-1724 B.C.] being cheated and earning nothing until the birth of Joseph, and finally six years [1724-1718 B.C.] for the flocks he took with him.

31:42-43 *If the God of my father, the God of Abraham and the Fear of Isaac ["God of Isaac", 31:53], had not been with me, you would surely have sent me away empty-handed. But God has seen my hardship and the toil of my hands, and last night He rebuked you." Laban answered Jacob, "The women are my daughters, the children are my children, and the flocks are my flocks. All you see is mine. Yet what can I do today about these daughters of mine, or about the children they have borne?"* (NIV)

If what Laban says is true, then Jacob had been legally adopted by Laban. A son could not establish his own household as long as he remained in the same locale as the patriarch, and could not leave unless the patriarch granted permission. That was not true of a son-in-law.

31:44 *Come now, let's make a covenant, you and I, and let it serve as a witness between us.*" (NIV)

Just as Isaac parted ways with Abimelech by making a covenant, so Jacob and Laban parted ways with a covenant.

31:45-50 *So Jacob took a stone and set it up as a pillar. He said to his relatives, "Gather some stones." So they took stones and piled them in a heap, and they ate there by the heap. Laban called it Jegar Sahadutha [Laban named it in Chaldean], and Jacob called it Galeed [Jacob named it in Hebrew]. Laban said, "This heap is a witness between you and me today." That is why it was called Galeed. It was also called Mizpah ["watchtower"], because he said, "May the LORD keep watch between you and me when we are away from each other. If you mistreat my daughters or if you take any wives besides my daughters, even though no one is with us, remember that God is a witness between you and me."* (NIV)

If Jacob was the adopted son of Laban, then he was bound not to marry women outside the household. This was one reason Laban gave handmaids to his two daughters. Since handmaids were

considered part of the patriarchal family, if Laban's daughters were found to be incapable of bearing children, the handmaids could be used as surrogate mothers. Even though they are now parting ways, Laban reminds him of the vow that had been made at the time Jacob agreed to the terms of adoption.

31:51-53 Laban also said to Jacob, "Here is this heap, and here is this pillar I have set up [Hebrew MS: "you have set up"; Samaritan text: "the pillar which you see"] between you and me. This heap [set up by Laban] is a witness, and this pillar [set up by Jacob] is a witness, that I will not go past this heap to your side to harm you and that you will not go past this heap and pillar to my side to harm me. May the God of Abraham and the God of Nahor, the God of their father, judge between us." So Jacob took an oath in the name of the Fear of his father Isaac ["by Him Whom Isaac feared"]. (NIV)

Swearing by gods

Laban swore by all the gods he felt were pertinent. It is remotely possible that the God of Abraham was the same as the god of Nahor and Terah. Jacob, however, refused to swear except by the God of his father Isaac, Who he had personally encountered.

31:54-55 He offered a sacrifice there in the hill country and invited his relatives to a meal. After they had eaten, they spent the night there. Early the next morning Laban kissed his grandchildren and his daughters and blessed them. Then he left and returned home. (NIV)

Laban's Consent

It was necessary to have a meal in conjunction with a covenant. At this point, Laban gives his consent for Jacob to leave his household and form his own.